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THE RELATION OF COMPOSITION TO THE REST OF THE CURRICULUM

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The relation of composition to the rest of the curriculum was described some years ago by a well-known practitioner in the art as "the most irrelevant thing in nature, a piece of impertinent correspondence, an odious approximation, a haunting conscience, a preposterous shadow, a perpetually recurring mortification, a mere intolerable dun upon your pride, an apology to your friends," and other things ungratefully encountered—a *poor relation* indeed. Though the whole of rhetoric, of which composition is but a part, must be included in the consideration of this subject, there is no question, I take it, that Freshman composition is the principal problem and may therefore with propriety be made the center of this discussion.

This course was at the beginning foreordained to an estate of poverty. Without adequate resources for the proper performance of one, it was given two functions to perform. It should be on the one hand immediately practical, promptly relieving the Freshman of his inbred and accustomed illiteracy and bestowing on him some degree of facility not only in the use of his mother-tongue but also in adapting it to such special uses as his technical studies might require. On the other hand and at the same time, it should be an essentially cultural influence, the sole, sufficient ornament, the touch of grace and finish in a college curriculum otherwise practical or technical. Into this prescribed course the system of certification admitted nearly all Freshmen without examination.

Traces of both purposes are still to be found in the course, but a steady trend toward the practical has left little of the cultural or liberal tincture in the mixture. Almost the only aim of the course as now generally given is to remove as many as may be of the worst manifestations of illiteracy and, by means of short cuts to

facility, to become a "handmaiden" to the rest of the curriculum. With the purpose as announced in one of our large universities "to give the student such training as he needs in expression and organization of thought in order to deal satisfactorily with the material of other departments of study" there is no serious fault to be found. Though it grants to the study no value in itself, this is, I believe, a modest description of a thoroughly good course in the fundamental matters on which any training in composition must rest. Not so much can be said for what in many instances now passes among us for the same thing. In pursuit of practical efficiency and in a sincere but mistaken attempt to make Freshman rhetoric meet immediate social and industrial needs, or to avoid an accusation of wasting time on unapplied theory, the idea of rhetoric has faded to but a "preposterous shadow" of its better self. Instead we have courses in ideas, in the evolution of the Darwinian theory since the death of Darwin, in current events, in advertising, in journalism, in engineering English, in agricultural English, in technique of the short story and of the play, and many other fads and specialties that promise to make competent writers out of students who know no rhetoric, whose amoebic sentences grope blindly across the page, whose fluid ideas are expected to mold the vessel in which they are to be contained.

Little promise of good for beginning college students lies in a course based on the idea of specialization or adaptation to immediately practical ends. There may come from it some access of interest, some appearance of more effective pedagogical method than from old-fashioned rhetoric. But in them is no real hope. More reassuring are the courses in ideas and other contrivances by which rhetorical method and facility in composition are to be inculcated incidentally. Make the student think, arouse his interest in a set of ideas to such a point that he must achieve self-expression or burst, and he will achieve self-expression. That is an excellent theory, and it must find a place in every well-conducted course in composition. Used by the well-balanced teacher who knows precisely what he is about, who has a clear perception of proportion and of relative values, the theory undoubtedly can be applied with profit. But its application will not diminish the need of instruction in the

theory and principles of rhetoric. In a course in ideas a skilful teacher may impart a sufficient minimum of rhetoric without using additional time, or he may not; the less skilful instructor simply cannot do so, and consequently he teaches something that is loosely called ideas and neglects rhetoric.

This tendency would be less harmful if our students should but enter college with a trustworthy grounding in the elements of written and spoken English. They do not. There are many reasons why, any one of which ought to warn us from specialization in our Freshman course; but perhaps the one most pertinent to our discussion is this, that the same tendency that is injuring college rhetoric is at work in the high school, where certainly there is no less need than in the college for careful and persistent drill in the elements of composition. But there, as in the college, is to be seen the now almost general endeavor to adapt the course to immediate and special purposes. Practice in the technique and construction of the short story, of the drama, and of other special forms of writing is taking the place of lessons and drill in grammar, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and correct speech. Not only must the pupils be taught to do these highly specialized techniques; they must never be bored by the necessity of doing in their courses in composition that which is uninteresting. The fine frenzy of their creative literary passion must not be laid, their ardor cooled, their spontaneity and enthusiasm deadened by a matter-of-fact teacher who insists on the accomplishment of the really hard and often wearying task of learning the elementary principles underlying the structure of our speech.

One of the latest and most insidious of these substitutes for elementary composition and rhetoric in high schools is journalism. "‘Bring the *Times* to class tomorrow as a text’ (in rhetoric) is an assignment that has not yet ceased to startle the pupils of our school" blithely writes a teacher from the department of English in a New York high school. The announcement is one to startle not only the pupils of that school but also everyone who has at heart the task of teaching English composition; and concern deepens as he reads on in the cheery tale: "We plan to cover the newspaper in about ten lessons, with, of course, abundant outside

reading and investigation, which form the basis of oral reports. On our library shelves we have Opdyke's *News Ads and Sales*, Given's *The Newspaper*, Diblee's *The Making of a Newspaper*, Ross's *The Writing of News*, and other good books on the newspaper." The classification of news, the problem of make-up, the technique of the first page, the analysis of the news story, the art of camouflage as practiced by the writers of headlines, the editorial page, and letters to the editor are for weeks studied in class by those pupils who at best have but a slight and unsteady hold on the vernacular. This is but a typical instance of the manner in which the real purpose of the course and the rational means to attain that purpose are lost sight of as soon as some external element is introduced, whether for the sake of interest or for the promotion of "efficiency."

The prevailing tendency is reflected in the stream of textbooks in college rhetoric. For ten years or so there has been a steady diminution in the amount of rhetorical theory offered in them; that which has been retained has been made more and more elementary, requiring less and less knowledge or study on the part of the student. Makers of rhetorical texts have made the subject seem so simple and easy that the students, and in many instances the teachers too, have come to believe that the subject is too slight to merit the serious attention of a college Freshman, busy with the real activities of life. To be sure, this is not equally true of all recent rhetorics. Possibly a promise of a better future lies in the fact that some of them, and some of the most recent, present a respectable body of sound and undiluted rhetorical theory. But these are not typical of the prevailing tendency. For the exposition of vital general principles of rhetoric, too often there has been substituted, among other things, the handbook, which enables the writer ignorant of general laws of composition to remove by external application the more flagrant signs of his deficiencies without touching the underlying ignorance itself. The handbook meets a real need in the readiest way and is unquestionably useful. I should think it might very well be indispensable to the uneducated person suddenly thrown naked upon the sea of authorship. And it is useful in the college course in rhetoric, if kept in its

proper place as a superficial, supplemental, temporary aid to the puzzled writer. Only when it usurps the place of a textbook in rhetoric, assumes a principal place in the course, crowding out the exposition of rhetorical principles—only then does it become a harmful thing. Its general use reveals the unsoundness and instability of our conception of the nature and purpose of Freshman rhetoric.

The more classroom reading of good English prose we can require of our students the better, if what they read enables them to see how skillful writers apply the principles of composition. But zeal for the temporarily interesting and immediately practical has led to the use of current periodicals as offering models of English style. Some of them of course do sometimes afford good models; but even at its best this material is open to the same criticism as the course in ideas. Books of specimens, more generally used than periodicals, in the main offer sound models, though tending somewhat toward specialization and the contemporaneous. One is carried back to the middle of the nineteenth century, to the *Nosegays*, *Ladies' Wreaths*, and all manner of dainty and refined sentimentalities by the thought of what may be harbored in a volume, issued not long ago, of readings in rhetoric specially selected for females. *Essays for College Men* is not an appeal to sex interest, but offers papers on education, science, and art, selected primarily because they may all fit the taste and satisfy the interest of men in college. An undesirable kind of self-consciousness or mental inbreeding is suggested by the volume on "college life, its conditions and problems." In the main, the books of specimens promise or threaten in their titles more of specialization than is to be found in their contents. One opens with misgiving, for instance, *English and Engineering*, to find English written by Arnold Bennett, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Wordsworth, Huxley, Tyndall, and other masters, on a wide variety of subjects. Here is a plain announcement for all technicians who read, that good English, wherever found, is English for engineers as well as for all the rest of us.

The course in Freshman composition, with all its faults and its virtues, is to a great extent, and must continue to be, a handmaiden

to the rest of the curriculum, standing in vital relation to all other subjects. It must continue to teach those common elements of the vernacular which ought to be the objective of active co-operation among teachers of all subjects. But at the same time it should be something more than that, for it has had, and can have still more if we will but rescue it from its present low estate, an independent place and a value of its own. One of the Aberdeen rhetoricians long ago protested that the author of *Hudibras* exaggerated in saying

For all a rhetorician's rules
Teach nothing but to name his tools.

We have of late been echoing the complaint of Butler; I believe that our way out of the wilderness, in which we have failed to find ourselves, lies in the direction of Campbell's protest. For, although there may be no fixed laws in the province of rhetoric, there are many laws of rhetorical method in fairly fixed relation to rhetorical effects, a whole body of rhetorical principles of the utmost usefulness to anyone who would develop a sound English style, principles that we have more and more ignored or diluted in our effort to avoid mere theory and to reach the practical by direct action. We must teach more rhetoric; we must underlay and join with the practical work of theme-writing a larger proportion of theory and a better understanding of the elements of style, that we may sink a firm foundation for whatever type of writing the student may subsequently be called upon to construct.

It would be a pleasure to say that there is noticeable now a tendency in that direction. It is not yet apparent, but soon it must be and will be; for there is now discoverable among the teachers of rhetoric in a large part of the country a conscious will to make it so.

Improvement will inevitably follow a persistent and intelligent effort to give the course the dignity of importance in itself. But that importance will come only in connection with certain other changes affecting the proportions of the whole English curriculum. One aspect of that change began to emerge with the establishing of courses for prospective teachers of Freshman composition. Part of

the faultiness which we wish to mend is of course attributable to bad teaching by young persons who never expected and will never wish to teach the subject. These training courses are improving the situation, in so far as it is a pedagogical problem. But it is far more complex than a problem in pedagogy. Young scholars know that the worker in rhetoric for Freshmen, in most of our universities, is out of the scholastic and academic succession. The course leads nowhere, in the matter of promotion, and, so far as our curricula show, has no scholarly relationships. Not only is it a poor relation; it has in truth a blot on its 'scutcheon and may not be a relation at all.

The relation of rhetoric courses, all of them, to the rest of the curriculum will be one in which teachers may take more satisfaction than they now feel when departments of English pay direct attention to the possibilities that lie in the higher aspects of rhetorical study. Few of our larger universities offer courses in advanced rhetoric, distinct from, in addition to, or as a part of, courses in advanced composition, which latter are often, it may be said, advanced only in the sense of specialization as to type—practice courses in practical authorship. Our teachers of composition, with some fortunate exceptions, have not felt concerned with the history of rhetorical theory; they have not become aware of the relation of rhetoric to aesthetics and to criticism. Beyond a possible history of the English language presented from an etymological point of view they have not passed even in fancy to a parallel study of English prose style, and on to investigations of the rhythm and melody of prose, in the field of aesthetics that has a vital relation to the study of literature and literary values.

Little encouragement to do so has been extended to them. Where should he who wishes to do these things look for encouragement or courses? To whom should he go? A very few names come readily to mind in this connection. Is there in the curricula of our graduate schools any indication that a student is welcome, not to say encouraged, to work for a higher degree in this field? I find such welcome indicated in but rare instances.

If we believe that this is properly true because the field of rhetoric offers no sufficient opportunity for graduate investigation

and scholarly research at all comparable in quantity or quality to the fields of literary history and linguistics, then I believe the time has come for a careful reconsideration of relative values. Our advanced students of English and our teachers of it have not sufficiently intimate and sympathetic acquaintance with the work of the principal rhetoricians from Aristotle on. Too few have nothing to learn from Quintilian, Thomas Wilson, Campbell, Chaignet, Bosanquet, Santayana, Spender, Gerber, to select at random from a long list of writers, who have found in the history and theory of human expression subjects worthy of their most profound thought. I would not suggest that a value in the least factitious be attached to this aspect of the study of English, but that what seems to me a neglected field should receive an amount of attention in keeping with its importance as a province of scholarly endeavor and as a tonic influence on that part of our department which is the seat of much distress. I would propose a scholarly succession for students of human expression, in order that teachers in Freshman rhetoric should not feel that in their work they must perpetually traverse a province that affords no outlet to their ambitions; and that, although in the course itself they might find little or no chance to teach the refinements peculiar to their higher interests, they could at least sense a relationship now imperceptible. Such students would make more willing teachers of even elementary rhetoric than those who believe it necessary to go into what seems to them the almost unrelated departments of literary history or linguistics for their intellectual exercise and development. They would, moreover, make better teachers of rhetoric, not only because they would know more about their subject and would teach more gladly, but also because they would impart a new significance to the reading that is a part of all good courses in Freshman rhetoric. Such literary content of the course is now taught almost invariably from the point of view of literature rather than of rhetoric. The teacher of rhetoric must have a rich background of literature, the richer the better; but he must not substitute background for foreground and make his rhetoric courses merely additional courses in literature. He will be least in danger of doing that who has the best training in rhetoric *per se*.

What is needed, then, if the estate of rhetoric is to be mended, is that the elementary course should be freed from all interests and influences that now in large measure take away from it the character of a primary discipline in the principles as well as the practice of rhetoric; that the possibilities and opportunities for scholarship in higher rhetoric should be considered and enlarged; that the relation of the elementary course to the rest of the curriculum should be made closer and stronger by providing a scholarly succession in the field of rhetoric; and that recognition be granted to the need of making possible a corresponding academic succession open to the teacher of rhetoric and composition.